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From soul catcher

Missionaries are shadowy people. Hundreds of them still descend on Europe every year from the far corners of the earth. They look like anyone else emerging from airports, though their dress code probably leaves something to be desired. They have travelled from remote parts where style does not count and materialism is unknown. They bring this experience with them to home cultures they have been distanced from and homes they may not recognise. And back where they came from, few people have an accurate grasp of what their work involves.

Before Vatican II

Part of the reason for this is that so little is known about missionary history. Missionaries thumbed lifts on colonial ships. Some blessed slave ships leaving Angola. Others, later, educated indigenous populations in non-violent resistance to oppression. But the documented accounts are relatively thin on the ground. Describing his experiences in the jungle in Liberia in 1935, the missionary Thomas O'Shaughnessy (who later published *Rest Your Head in Your Hand* detailing his experiences) wrote, "We know that if yellow fever happened to be raging when we arrived, our immediate death was practically certain ... It was a six-day walk to the village ... the carriers asked in each village for the path to the next town ... the whole journey lasted two weeks ... [how could this be] that I should be listening to night crickets and wading through swamps in an African forest to help a dying human being I had never known? One reflected on one's loneliness, one's exile and tried to find a remedy for gloom. Why the longings for one's country? I had few books other than the complete works of Shakespeare and G.B. Shaw. Every two or three months, the mail brought some magazines and papers that might be six months old. We had no music or radio."

The Positive ...

That is a classic description of missionary life in the early part of the last century. At home, we knew that these were people who set out to bring salvation to the world;

they established the Church in unlikely places. There was a mystique about them. Some were given missionary crosses in a public ceremony before they went. They were acclaimed minor heroes, riding into the unknown bringing the good news of Christianity.

... and the Negative

But there was another, a more negative image. Earlier missionaries were sometimes referred to as "soul catchers" and accused of hunting and baptizing poor heathen children and their parents. Many appeared in a mission area all too often as "benefactors" (sometimes they still do) always

is a multifaceted learning process. It is a long journey to Emmaus dotted with many breaking revelations of God.

Serious missionaries today read the novels and newspapers of the local people and steep themselves in their lore when possible. They learn the local language, and know in advance that their insensitivity to local cultures will be remembered and often criticized in future. This is the lot of any missionary, from St. Paul's encounter with the philosophers of Athens or the first Franciscan martyrs who really didn't get it right in Morocco. They went with naïve zeal to convert the Muslim infidels, who turned on them.



Nzama Mission, Malawi, 1901: Chief Njobvuyalema and his warriors welcome the first Catholic missionaries.

handing out things. It was a feel-good experience. I felt it myself. And at times missionaries, both lay and clerical, didn't notice that their behavior was seen as arrogant, especially when they believed that they had a duty to bring "civilization" to Africa, Asia or South America. This was the model of mission before the Second Vatican Council, that is, before the Sixties.

Sensitive to local cultures

Thirty-five years ago some missionaries stopped attending Irish cultural gatherings on St. Patrick's Day in South Africa when we found Irish immigrants to be too insular and European in their perspective. It was difficult to cope with their acceptance of apartheid. Empowering people to savour the life and words of Jesus, we now know,

The long-term missionary (man or woman) prayerfully invites the faithful to interpret the presence of God in their situations and through their cultures. Softly penetrating another culture, trying to understand its beliefs and even trying out its slang languages has always been rewarding for a missionary. Cross-cultural experiences change people willing to be changed. A person is drawn into questioning his own assumptions and ways of seeing things as he enters sympathetically into the lives of others.

A spiritual adventure

Passing over to the wonderland of another culture can be the most profound spiritual experience of a missionary's life, a spiritual adventure. It is a continuation of

to adventurer

Patrick Noonan OFM

Incarnation. And it includes the transforming of cultures where they might lack the love of God. And when he comes back to Europe he is not the same person. His viewpoint and insights may well have changed, broadened and become more objective.

The serious missionary learns that the people of the host culture will accept him when they are ready, once he has opened and disclosed himself sufficiently and with empathy to their world view. There is a powerful lesson in listening here — learned, typically, from people's stories as we sit crouched around a table with one flickering candle long into the African night. The mis-

frame of reference in life. When many of his "non-missionised" colleagues, friends and family at home encounter his changed perspectives they are sometimes mystified and uncomprehending.

Readjusting to their own culture

When a missionary returns on holidays, he must reconnect with his life story before he left. This he does through his extended family and friends and colleagues. He connects too with his sending congregation or organization. Some religious congregations have de-briefing mechanisms in place to assist their missionaries to readjust to their own culture as soon as possible after arriv-

lost contact with the innovative, spontaneous energy of the Holy Spirit or ushered the life-giving Spirit to the sidelines.

Giving to, receiving from each other

While Europe has rightly given much to the younger Churches of the world, and continues to do so, missionary experience has a lot to contribute to the mother Church in Europe, and Europe has something to learn from the Churches of Africa, South America and Asia. Globally, in the area of cultural gifts and belief, the West loves to expound truth, doctrine and order; Asia still offers us the gift of prayer and meditation; Latin America preaches liberation and solidarity with the poor, and Africa knows all about community and liturgical celebration. And St. Paul says these gifts are for all.

Today the African Church is booming. Thousands of lay leaders conduct priestless services every Sunday all over the continent. They have worked with married and unmarried deacons, with parish pastoral councils and finance committees. Perhaps the time has come for the Church in the southern hemisphere to come to the aid of the northern churches, and for the North to listen more keenly, more searchingly and more openly, to the Christian voices from the South.

The early Franciscan missionaries in Morocco 800 years ago learned from their experience. They changed their ways. Recently an Arab commentator said this about Franciscans in the Middle East: "Instead of engaging us [with apologetics], they quietly go about our cities, serving everyone. Once people are served they become interested in Christianity, and the next thing you know they've become followers of Jesus. Those Franciscan Christians don't fight fair with us." ■

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Nigerian Spiritan Martin Ilozue surrounded by his Filipino community.

sionary has a sense of being pulled emotionally in different directions by his home country and the country he has come to serve in. Sometimes he feels closer to the soul of his adopted country than his own country of birth. Meanwhile, responding to local needs, he is trying to be a car mechanic, carpenter, plumber, painter, electrician, accountant, motivator, problem-solver, peacemaker, organizer, secretary, pastoral priest, brother or sister all in one.

He begins to find the Christ of other cultures — "the hidden traces of God" — in other cultures. This is a hugely rewarding encounter, an experience of God in action. Previously unrecognized presences of God progressively and gradually materialize before him. This exposure to the diversity of the divinity slowly becomes his

ing home. If he is coming from a stressful situation of social or political conflict he would be advised to seek help. Here I speak from experience. I remember (with others) returning to Ireland in the Eighties for three-month holiday periods during the uprising in South Africa. I was stressed but at the time didn't realize it. By the end of the holidays, when I prepared to return, the stress had barely dissipated.

Again — with growing exceptions — missionaries are struck by the rigid, lifeless, spiritless liturgies they so often see in Europe. The missionaries, lay or clerical, like the African immigrant, note that church life tends to have a quality which unconsciously prevents it from wanting to learn from the vibrant life of the Church in other parts of the world. It seems to have